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Early History
of
Alma
and
Green Hill

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In the early settlement of Nova Scotia, Pictou County, especially the central part of it; seems to have been overlooked. But after the war between the English and the French ended with the taking of Quebec in 1759 many of the officers who had served in the Army received grants of land in Pictou. Other grants were given to companies of speculators on condition that they bring out settlers within a given time.

There had been some French settlers here earlier, with whom the Indians were quite friendly, even fighting with them at Louisburg and Quebec. So they looked on the English as enemies and resented their coming.

The first English settlers consisted of six families who came from Philadelphia in a vessel called the "Hope" in 1767. Among them being Dr. Harris (the agent) Robert Patterson, (surveyor), later known as Squire Patterson, perhaps the most influential person among the early settlers, and one James McCabe, formerly from Belfast, Ireland, who is said to have cut down the first tree in Pictou. Doubtless the McCabes of Green Hill were descendants of his.

They had been misled by stories of the new land. such as getting sugar off the trees, etc., so were sadly disappointed at the dreary sight that met their eyes. Not an English settler on the North Shore of the Province from the Strait of Canso to Bay Verte or farther, and the primeval forest down to the water's edge.

The only mode of travel was by water so they all settled near the harbor. They found three streams flowing into the harbor, which from their location they named East River, Middle River, and West River, and as other settlers arrived their place of settlement was

designated by the name of the nearest river, even though their home was miles away.

Although these first settlers had many privations they were never in actual want. Some new settlers arrived from the older colonies to the South, others went away until by 1773 there were sixteen families.

Then came the "Hector" with a party of Highlanders from Scotland. An agent, John Ross by name, had been sent to get emigrants promising each family a free passage, a free farm lot and a year's provisions. Many of the Highlanders were allured by the prospect of owning their own farm and embraced the opportunity.

So the Hector was chartered. Three families boarded her at Greenock, the rest at Loch Broom. In all thirty-three families and twenty-five unmarried men. Just as they were ready to start, a piper came on board. The master of the ship was going to put him off, but the passengers interceded for him saying they would share their rations with him in exchange for his music. They set sail early in July and arrived in Pictou Harbor Sept. 15th, 1773.

The Indians had been troublesome but when the English heard of the new immigrants coming they told the Indians that the same men they had seen in petticoats at the Battle of Quebec were coming to Pictou. The Hector had been painted in imitation of a man-of-war, and in celebration of their journey's end the young men arrayed themselves in their kilts, with skein dhu and broadswords, and as they dropped anchor, the piper blew his pipes with his utmost power. The Micmacs fled to the woods and never gave any more trouble.

They landed across the harbor from Pictou and in

memory of their home land they named the place Loch Broom.

The sight which met their eyes was very different from what they expected—no roads of any kind except a blazed path to Truro. The land around the harbor had all been taken up and nowhere else was a tract of cleared land to be seen. Discouraged, many of them moved to Halifax, Truro, Londonderry and even as far away as Windsor and Cornwallis. About seventy remained and many of the others returned later.

Of those who stayed Alexander Fraser, a native of Inverness-shire, settled on the east side of the Middle River, he being the first settler in the district, while Colin Douglas settled nearly opposite on the west side of the river. His son John was later known as "Deacon" Douglas. These two properties are still owned and occupied by direct descendants of the original grantees.

Kenneth Fraser and family settled first at Londonderry but later returned and took up land to the west of Colin Douglas's grant, but he bravely climbed the slope and made his home on the crest of the hill.

Angus McKenzie, another Hector passenger, had gone to Windsor, but he also later returned to Green Hill.

The next year 1774, a party of Lowland Scots chartered a boat and set sail from Drumfries for Prince Edward Island then called St. John's. They were well supplied with food and clothing, but landed in the autumn and were scarcely settled when a band of traders from the older colonies who happened to be in the harbor came ashore for a carousal. They plundered the warehouse of all it contained, then set fire to the building. On top of this came a plague of mice, so that the second

winter they would have starved had it not been for a French settlement some miles distant, from which they received food (principally potatoes) in exchange for the clothing they had brought with them from Scotland until they had scarcely enough left to clothe themselves decently.

Having heard there was food in Pictou they sent one of their number to find out. His report was so favorable they were glad to exchange total want in Prince Edward Island for a partial supply to be found in Pictou. Accordingly in 1776 about fifteen families moved over landing at Abercrombie. About half of them settled on the West River but Robert Marshall took up land on the east of the Middle River, making his home near McCulloch's Brook since known as Horne's Brook. John Smith settled on the opposite side where Thomas Horne since lived, now owned by J. J. McLeod, while the Crocketts and Brydens went a little farther up stream and the Blaikies settled on the northern slope of Green Hill.

This increase in the population made it harder for the former settlers who willingly shared what they had with those who were worse off. Fish and game was plentiful and as they got the land cleared they had good crops, principally wheat and potatoes. As there was no mill to grind the wheat the most of it was given in exchange for other goods. Every family had a hand mill but it was so hard to operate and as the flour was of an inferior quality, it was only on special occasions it was used. At that time there was not an oat mill in the whole of Nova Scotia. For some years much of the food had to be obtained from Truro, the men traveling through the forest on foot carrying a load on their backs, or in winter going on snow shoes which the

Indians had shown them how to make, and hauling a load on a handsled.

After the close of the American War in 1783 and 84 came the largest band of immigrants thus far. Most of them were disbanded soldiers who had been given a large grant of land around the shore from Fishers Grant eastward. Among them was one Alpin Grant who had served in the 84th regiment and who settled just below the town. Later another Alpin Grant, probably a grandson, lived at Green Hill, near where the drive-in theatre is now. Two of his sisters married McDonalds, brothers, Peter and Daniel.

In 1788 or 89 came a number of Lowlanders mostly from Dumfries, among whom were William Munsie, the first settler on Green Hill, on the farm still occupied by his descendant George Munsie. Also David McCoulland and Robert Sturgeon who settled on the South side of the hill and William Porter of Middle River.

The settlers were not long on the Middle River when they had need of a burying ground. So a site was selected on the hill on the East bank of the river. Here rest many of the pioneers of the Middle River district and it has been in use ever since.

Of the Highlanders who settled in Pictou few could read although most of them had Bibles, but few other books. The Dumfries settlers were more intelligent and both were deeply religious. For years the only teaching they had was a Bible reading on Sabbath when they would gather together and Robert Marshall would read to the English speaking people, while Colin Douglas did the same with the Gaelic.

The increase in population encouraged them to apply to Scotland for a Presbyterian minister. In the Spring

of 1786 their plea was granted and Rev. James Drummond McGregor was appointed.

At this time there were no roads or bridges. A path led from the East River to the Middle River and another from the Middle River to the West River but there was none from either to the harbor. From Truro there was only a blazed path but that summer men were engaged in making a road. This consisted merely in cutting down some of the trees and rolling the logs to one side. No attempt was made to remove the stumps or level the ground. As there were no bridges, when a traveller came to a brook he had to follow its course up stream until he came to a suitable place to cross. This made the route much longer than it would otherwise have been. At that time there were only four or five horses between Salmon River and Antigonish. The late John Douglas (Deacon) of Middle River used to tell of the first horse he ever saw. It belonged to a man from Truro who had called at his father's house. Returning home after a short absence one day he was surprised to see a huge animal tied to a tree. Peeping from behind another tree he was more surprised to see a strange man come out of the house, mount on its back and ride away.

To these dismal surroundings came the young Mr. McGregor, a native of Perthshire. He was early devoted to the ministry and having passed through his studies at Edinburgh College with credit, he studied theology and was in due time licensed to preach. He made a special study of the Highland language and thus became an accomplished Gaelic scholar.

He arrived at Halifax on July 11th, 1786, and the same week came to Truro on horseback. On the 21st he arrived at what has since been known as the "Ten

Mile Farm." then the nearest house to Truro. The following morning he was taken to the harbor in a canoe. He had expected to find a town and was very much disappointed to find there was no place where he could see two houses without trees between.

Next day he preached his first sermon in Pictou in Squire Patterson's barn. Word of his coming had been spread around and the people came from far and near, many of whom had never heard a sermon before. Those near walked through the woods or along the shore, but the majority came by boat and canoe.

The second Sabbath he preached on the East River just below where the Albion Mines is now, and the third Sabbath August 6th, he preached his first sermon on the Middle River.

The service was held on the east side of the river just at the head of the tide and under a majestic elm tree which, I think, still stands on Fraser's interval.

This place was chosen as the site for the first church as being the most central, but the plan was abandoned when it was decided to build two churches, one on the East River and another on the West River at Loch Broom.

The winter of 1786-87 was a very severe one. Snow—coming in November and not melting until April or May. Mr. McGregor found this very trying, as he was not used to it, so to make less travelling he preached two consecutive Sabbath's at each place and visited the homes between.

In the summer of 1788 his first Communion service was held, on the west side of the Middle River. Shaded by a steep wooded bank, the fables were spread under a

large tree which may still be seen on Douglas's interval at a short distance below Alma bridge.

This was a great occasion, as he was the only minister on the north shore of Nova Scotia and there was not a Presbyterian minister in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island or Cape Breton. So people came from as far away as Hants County to attend these services which lasted from Thursday until Monday.

At this time there were 130 Communicants. These services were held in the same place during the nine years that Dr. McGregor was alone. Not a drop of rain ever fell during these outdoor services.

In 1795 two other ministers arrived just in time for the Sacrament, the Rev. Duncan Ross and Rev. John Brown.

Immediately after the Communion session the three ministers with Robert Marshall, elder, united to form the first Presbytery in all Canada, and called the "Associate Presbytery of Pictou." The first meeting was held in Robert Marshall's barn.

As the community assumed a settled form we may pause to take a survey of people and conditions in the new colony. As to origin the majority were Scotch, a few lowlanders but many from the highlands and speaking the Gaelic language.

The Highlanders were accustomed to extreme poverty so were well fitted to endure the difficulties of a new settlement. They readily endured hardship but were not as eager to improve their condition as some others were. But when they were mixed with others they could compete with their neighbors in anything.

At this time, early in the 1800's the population was scattered principally along the shore and along the banks

of the rivers, wherever there was intervals. So scattered were they that often there was a distance of three or four miles between homes.

They had reached the position where they had plenty to eat. Their houses were still built of logs, small and sparsely furnished. Some British cloth was imported but generally people were clothed in what they made from their own wool and flax. As to their feet, all ages and both sexes carried them quite bare. When some additional covering became necessary it was generally a pair of rawhide moccasins. A pair of shoes was a prized possession.

Often when walking to church they would carry their shoes until nearly there, then they would stop, wash their feet in the brook, then sit down on the grass and put on their shoes and continue their journey.

A woman who arrived in 1795 attended the Sacrament wearing a pair of good shoes, when she was told to take good care of them as she would never see another pair.

In spite of all their hardships and exposure the people were generally very healthy. Infant mortality was rare and tuberculosis was unknown.

Store luxuries were very little used. One man remarked: "We bought a pound of tea. It cost us eight shillings, but it did us for eight years."

As they began to keep stock they were troubled by wild animals, particularly bears, some of them being large enough to attack a cow. When killed, a carcass often weighed five or six hundredweight.

Then trouble assailed from another direction. In 1815 came what is known as "the year of the mice." Coming in the spring they destroyed the growing crops

even the potatoes in the ground. In a grain field they cut the stem so that it fell down then ate the grain. So large and fierce were they that they would even defy the cat. In the autumn as the weather grew colder they sickened and died, their carcasses being so numerous a person could not walk around without stepping on them. They have never been so numerous since.

The next year 1816 was known as the "Year Without a Summer." In the woods the ground was hard frozen in June. The ground was not fit for cultivation until very late and what little crops were put in were destroyed by early frost. I have heard it said there was only one month in the year without frost. This coming just after the mice again reduced the settlers to hard lines. What food was to be got was very expensive, flour being £3, (about \$15.00) a barrel in Halifax. But we have never had two such hard years in succession since.

Now attention began to be given to better roads. It was quite natural that the first roads should follow the line of the blazed paths, and as the low ground was found to be swampy and boggy and unsafe for travel the path always followed the highest land, avoiding the hollows as much as possible. Thus the first road from Middle River to West River went over Green Hill, the route still used by the mail courier on Westville R. R. 1

The first bridges were just a log felled across the brook or later two or three logs with the upper side hewn flat. If the stream was too wide for that an abutment of three logs was built at either side and long logs laid between. The first bridge across Middle River was built in 1803.

Previously a bridge had been built across McCulloch's Brook, as it was ordered to be repaired in 1804.

The road around the south side of Green Hill, now forming part of provincial highway No. 4 was not built until 1850. For many years this was known as the NEW road while the one over Green Hill was the OLD road.

In the meantime schools were being built. The old school at Alma was just opposite Deacon Douglas's, while the one at Green Hill was on the rise of ground to the east of the present building and still known as the "School House Hill."

For a long time the nearest Church was at West River but in 1848-49 Salem Church was built at Green Hill, and which served the country for miles around. Here the first minister was Rev. George Patterson, a native of Pictou and a grandson of Dr. McGregor. Later he was known as Dr. Patterson, noted historian and author. This was his first and only charge. Here he labored faithfully and well for twenty-seven years, and here he preached his last sermon.

In the early days the mail was brought from Halifax to Pictou in a small schooner or packet. About 1815 Jacob Lynds began carrying it from Truro by horse and chaise. After a few years this was changed to a double-seated waggon capable of carrying three or four passengers and drawn by two horses, making the trip once a week. In 1828 a company was formed called the Eastern Stage Coach Co., to run a line of coaches between Halifax and Pictou. About 1842 Hiram Hyde purchased the establishment, used a covered coach, six or more horses and made a daily trip. For a time the coach also ran to New Glasgow, when they changed horses at "Granny Marshall's" near where R. G. Ross's home is

now. This continued until the building of the railroad about the time of Confederation.

About this time Post Offices began to be opened in rural districts. The Green Hill had named itself from its height and its verdant color which could be seen miles away, but the lower district had been known just as Middle River. This would not do for the name of a post office as it might mean any place between Loch Broom and Lansdowne. This was shortly after the close of the Crimean War, when the victory gained at the Battle of Alma was still fresh in people's memory, so the name Alma was chosen. The first post master was Silas Archibald who kept the office in his own house. After his death the office was taken over by A. H. Fraser and was later attended to by his son.

At Green Hill the post office was for a long time in charge of Mrs. Jessie McKenzie who also kept a general store where McCunn's garage is now. Another early merchant was James McDonald whose store was just opposite the Green Hill school house.

The first merchant in Alma was James McCabe. When he moved away, his father, Alexander McCabe took over the business and later sold to A. H. Fraser, while just opposite James McGregor Fraser also kept store for a time.

Although this has always been an agricultural district many of the farmers specializing in dairying, yet there have been other industries at various times. Among the first was a saw-mill and grist-mill owned by Archibald Brothers and situated on the east side of the river, just above the bridge. The large house at the end of the bridge was built for a boarding-house to accommodate

the employees. The property was later purchased by George Conley who operated an axe factory on the former mill site until the building was destroyed by fire about fifty years ago.

For a time John Fraser and sons had a wood-working plant at Green Hill where they made rakes and other implements as well as settees, etc.

To the south west J. J. McLean and Sons had a large tannery. They later moved to Hopewell, but the district is still known as Tanner Hill.

At a later date in the Sylvester district (then included in Alma) a large brick yard was owned and operated by Mr. William Cameron of Stellarton for a long time. Here all the spare men of the community found employment during the summer months, as well as a number of Frenchmen who migrated spring and fall.

At first every man was his own Artisan, but gradually trained mechanics became available. Among the early blacksmiths was Thomas Kennedy who had a farm and shop near the cemetery. As his farm was small and he had a family of growing boys he exchanged with his neighbor across the river, Mr. Robert Gerrard, who had a large farm and whose family were girls. As he was not a blacksmith he had no use for the shop so it was taken over by his son-in-law Thomas Ross, who continued in business there for the rest of his life and was succeeded by his son R. G. Ross, now retired.

After a time a carriage shop was added and Ross's truck wagons were noted for their strength and durability.

If Mr. Gerrard did not shine at the blacksmith's forge his talents lay in another direction, as no social gathering was complete without Mr. Gerrard with his

fiddle, but he did not encourage late hours as he could never be persuaded to play after twelve o'clock.

Carriage builders at Green Hill were J. Allan McLeod and Edward Cunningham while William Watters, a native of Green Hill had a shop at near by West River.

Of those in the building trade we might mention James Halliday, who built Salem Church and many of the older buildings, Hugh Douglas, a noted framer. Alex Douglas, also of Alma and Samuel Brown whose five sons were all carpenters. Among shoemakers we have heard of Irving Munsie and William Campbell at Salem. and J. McGregor Fraser and Edwin Archibald at Alma, also George Horne who later conducted business in New Glasgow.

In the late years of the last century Green Hill could boast of having the oldest active tailor and painter in the county in the persons of Mr. Alexander Fraser and Mr. John F. Munsie.

In the year 1867 the Intercolonial Railway (now the C.N.R.) from Halifax eastward and passing through Pictou County was completed. Then the Pictou Branch was built between Pictou town and the main line at Stellarton. Later a siding was put in at Alma, but the Alma Station was not built until early in the present century. The late James Conn was the first station-master, a position he filled creditably for a quarter of a century or more.

Of those from this district who entered the learned professions during the last century, some were Rev. John George Cameron and brother Rev. Daniel Cameron. Rev. Edward Grant, Rev. John W. McKenzie, for many years a missionary in the New Hebrides, and brother Rev.

James A. McKenzie, Rev. Duncan Crockett and brother Rev. John T. Crockett, Rev. William Douglas, Prof. J. J. McKenzie and Judge George Patterson.

While of early teachers from the district we have heard such names as Elizabeth Miller, Ann Miller, Martha Fraser, Cassie McKenzie, Louisa Patterson, J. W. McKenzie, William Fraser, A. P. Douglas and James Conn. These have all passed on with the exception of Miss Patterson (now Mrs. Lively) who makes her home in B. C.

About 1880 a number of the Alma men clubbed together and bought a building which they had moved and finished for a hall for public meetings. Here were held political meetings, agricultural meetings and various social gatherings, as well as the regular weekly meetings, Sunday School, Bible Class, a Temperance Lodge (I. O. G. T.) and the weekly Prayer Meeting conducted by the men of the district with an occasional visit from a neighboring clergyman. For forty years or more it was a very stormy Thursday night that did not find the neighbors gathered together for prayer meeting, and there are many by whom the lessons learned in the old hall at Alma will never be forgotten.

In closing I will quote a poem written a long time ago by a former Alma lady who later moved to the New England States and passed away there some years ago.

THE ALMA PRAYER MEETING

I remember the Alma prayer meetings;
Yes, all the Sylvesters were there,
When Alex, Archie and Wilbur
Also Jim Falconer led in prayer.

The Douglasses, Frasers and Hallidays,
Memory calls them up at will,
To the prayer meeting at Alma
They came from all over Green Hill.

The Hatches, Brydens, and McCabes,
The McEwans and Thompsons, every one I knew
And it would not be a prayer meeting at all
If Jim Conn was not sitting there too.

With Deacon Kennedy, the Crocketts and Jim Bob,
Oh, we had a dandy crew,
With Jesus for our Captain
And a Heavenly port in view.

James McGregor Fraser started all the tunes
Gave us the pitch and kept it true
I know he is singing up in Heaven
As on earth he used to do.

There's John Alex and John Robert
I reserved a space for them
Along with Sam and Elbridge
Two more good quiet men.

I haven't mentioned the women,
For it's even now as then,
Once you find the men folks
You won't need to look long for them.

Be the weather foul or fair
Gerrard's and Ross's were always there
For what cared we for a little rain
Those living will remember Libbie Jane.